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ABSTRACT

Teacher testing began in Arkansas when the governor threatened to veto a 1% sales tax if a teacher testing bill were not passed. With enactment of Act 76 in 1983, an instrument was developed for field testing in 1984 over objections of the Arkansas Education Association. The test, the Arkansas Educational Skills Assessment, is comprised of 50 multiple-choice reading questions, 50 mathematics questions, and a 200-word writing sample. Many legislators attempted to modify or eliminate the Act but the governor strongly supported it. Disagreements over cutoff scores, test bias, confidentiality of results, and testing procedures marked the period prior to the test date, March 23, 1985. Problems, including mixed-up scores and content leaks, were associated with subsequent test occasions in 1987. Finally, 3.6% of the teachers were never able to pass the test. In spite of the comedy-of-errors aspects of the test controversy, public support for teacher testing seems to indicate that the education profession needs to confront its own problems and to take steps to ensure the competency of those who enter its ranks. (SLD)

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ARKANSAS TEACHER TESTING:
A PENNY FOR YOUR SCORES

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Abstract

Arkansas teacher testing began as the result of a compact, more or less, between the legislature and the voting public for a one-cent sales tax increase. The agreement involved testing the teachers in trade for the first sales tax increase in years. The public bought the idea willingly, if not eagerly. Unfortunately, what followed was a comedy of errors which has haunted the legislature as well as teachers since the bill was enacted as Act 76 of 1983.

The Arkansas Education Association was opposed to the idea of testing the teachers and encouraged a statewide boycott by its members. Legislators submitted numerous bills to modify, lessen, or even eliminate the requirements of Act 76. Governor Bill Clinton, on the other hand, threatened to veto any bill which threatened the act's impact.

A number of incidents followed in relation to teacher testing, including thefts of tests, errors in test preparation manuals, and mixed-up scores, all contributing an almost humorous aspect to an effort taken quite seriously by all involved.

ARKANSAS TEACHER TESTING:
A PENNY FOR YOUR SCORES

Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton's effort to initiate teacher testing to improve education in the state made its first official appearance with the introduction by State Representative Jodie Mahony of House Bill 47, October 10, 1983, to a special session of the legislature. The bill required that teachers and administrators pass a basic skills test by June 1, 1987, to be recertified. In addition, it required that they complete a test in their subject area or take six hours of college courses. Although it was rejected 8-7 by the House Education Committee to the cheers of the Arkansas Education Association (AEA), a National Education Association affiliate, a similar bill (SB 81) in the Senate was approved by the Senate Education Committee. After Governor Clinton threatened to veto a one percent sales tax if the teacher testing bill were not passed, the House committee reconsidered and voted 11-4 to recommend the bill. The full House was not as easily intimidated. It voted 50-37 to reject the bill.

Another bill, HB 73, supported by the AEA, offered teacher evaluation without the test. It passed the House 54-27. After it passed, State Representative Jonathan Fitch, who had previously not supported HB 47, asked that it be reconsidered. This time it passed 58-27. The Senate also passed the bill, 22-13. On Halloween day, with Clinton's signature and howls from outraged AEA President Peggy Nabors, teacher testing in Arkansas became law. The AEA-backed HB 73 was never brought to a vote.

The State Board of Education voted April 15, 1984, to schedule the administration of the test the following March or April. At the end of

May, Instructional Objectives Exchange Assessment Associates (IOX) of Culver City, California was selected to assume the responsibility for developing and administering the test for $284,995.

On November 3, 1984, 498 of about 1,500 teachers who were invited to take the test, field tested the exam. An AEA survey claimed that 95 percent of them felt that they had performed satisfactorily or better on the test.

Less that three weeks later, ten teachers whose legal fees were underwritten by the AEA with the assistance of the NEA, filed suit against the state Board of Education and Tommy Venters, Director of the General Education Division of the state Department of Education, claiming that Act 76 would be unfairly applied and a violation of equal protection rights.

On December 3, 1984, the Education Department selected March 23, 1985, as the date for the first administration of the teacher test.

When the legislature met next, in January, a number of thwarted attempts to eviscerate or otherwise modify the teacher testing law, were made. House Bill 11, sponsored by Representative Patrick Flanagin, would have exempted teachers and administrators aged 50 and over, those within five years of retirement, and vocational education personnel whose original certification was not based on a college degree. In addition, it would have abolished the requirement of a subject-area test and replaced it with six hours of education courses related to techniques or methodology, or training programs in their respective areas.

House Bill 178, by Representative William Mills, would have prohibited a teacher's being dismissed for failure to pass the test. Another bill, HB 179, also by Mills, would have abolished the subject area test and required completion of three hours of college credit instead.

House Bill 224, by Representatives Bubba Wade and Bill Samson, would have reset the deadline for passing the test from June 1, 1987, to June 1, 1988.

On the other side, Representative Bill Foster, who played a key role in seeing through the House the 1983 bill which raised the sales tax, was prepared to introduce legislation to repeal the sales tax if any of the new educational standards, including the teacher test law, were weakened.

Amid the legislative furor, publications and courses were being released to help teachers prepare for their tests. One English teacher, Janet Harris from Pocahontas, complained to Director Venters that one booklet contained numerous punctuation errors. She questioned whether the same person who proofread the booklet would be grading her test.

After seeing sample questions for the test in a 10-page workbook distributed by IOX to teachers to help them prepare for the exam, Dr. Gene Campbell, Dean of the College of Education of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, described the test as being simple. She said that the important issue was the passing score which would determine Arkansans' faith in the testing procedure.

While Dean Campbell was describing how easy the test was, the teacher education and certification staff of the Department of Education were busy offering two and a half hour courses in locations throughout the state designed to help prepare the teachers for the exam.

The test, officially called the Arkansas Educational Skills Assessment, was described as being comprised of three parts: 50 each of multiple-choice reading and mathematics questions and a 200 word writing sample. The writing samples would be graded by two judges with a third called in to settle disagreements, while the other two parts would be computer-graded.

The AEA and Governor Clinton worked opposite sides of the fence prior to the first testing. The AEA hired a union actress from Washington D.C. to pose as a teacher in an advertisement against the test, broadcast on television stations around the state. The advertisement suggested classroom evaluation as an alternative to the test. Clinton broadcast his own commercials in favor of the test on radio stations around the state, which said that not only was he in favor of classroom evaluations also, but that he had favored them when the AEA had been opposed to them.

A quirk was found in the original teacher testing legislation which provided ammunition for the AEA to use in a lawsuit contesting the test: only current teachers were to be tested. Teachers who were not currently teaching, were on a leave of absence, or who were teaching in private schools, were inadvertently exempted from the test. Representative Mahony quickly offered House Bill 511 to include those teachers.

Further fueling the fires of discord was a report in early March by Dr. James Popham, Director of IOX, that the results of the November field test indicated that white teachers scored far better on the exam than black teachers. Using 70 percent as a cutoff score on the field test of the reading section, 44 percent of the black teachers would have passed, while 78 percent of the white teachers would have. For the mathematics section, the respective scores for a 70 percent cutoff were 47 and 91.

On March 3, 1985, the state Teacher Education, Certification, and Evaluation Committee was given the task, in one Sunday afternoon, of recommending cutoff scores for the teacher test. The members complained that they needed more time to consider the matter and that they lacked pertinent information including the validity and reliability of the test scores. At the same time they were reminded that the legislature was considering rescinding the law, that many teachers opposed it, that legal action was pending, that Governor Clinton strongly supported it, and that the state Board of Education was to meet March 11th to set the scores.

Under this pressure and notwithstanding the lack of information, the committee voted 8-5 to recommend a passing score for the reading portion of the test to be set at 50 percent while it voted 9-4 that the mathematics section would have a 60 percent passing score. With those cutoffs, field test results suggested that 87 percent of blacks and 99 percent of whites would pass reading and 79 percent of blacks and 98 percent of whites would pass mathematics. The committee voted 12-2 to accept a grading process developed by a 36-member Skills Identification Working Group of state educators with the assistance of IOX personnel.

Immediately, the recommendations were criticized. Governor Clinton said that based on his understanding of the test, the cutoff scores seemed to be too low. Dr. Jim Young, Chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock called the cutoff scores unacceptable in light of the 80 percent cutoff requirement in many school districts then, for mastery for successful completion of a course. He stated that he would not want his children taught by any teacher who could not score at least 90 percent on the test. Dr. Ruth Steele, then an associate superintendent in the Little Rock Public School District, stated that the recommended cutoff percentages were not viewed as acceptable in most academic courses.

The AEA refused to recommend passing scores for the test because they claimed it was faulty, invalid, and unreliable. In addition, Walt Eilers, Executive Director of the AEA, suggested a strong possibility that failing teachers would bring suits against the state.

Strangely enough, only three persons attended a public hearing sponsored by the state Education Department for comments on the proposed cutoff scores. An NAACP representative, Dr. H. Benjamin Williams, claimed the test was racially motivated. Eilers complained about the process for determining cutoff scores, and a parent, Nancy Burton, said the scores were too low.

The state Board of Education met Monday, March 11, 1985, and set the cutoff scores for both reading and mathematics at 70 percent on a 4-3 vote to the praises of Governor Clinton. Dr. Popham had assured the Board that the test was reliable and said that 414 educators and patrons reviewed the

items the previous December and recommended passing scores in the 60's and 70's for the two parts under consideration.

To demonstrate their opposition to the test, the AEA sponsored a candlelight vigil in front of the state Capitol eight days before the test was to be administered. More than 1,000 teachers from across the state, many with blankets, braved the cool night air and heard two hours of speeches and telegrams from opponents of the test. The next day, approximately 4,000 persons rallied at the Capitol to hear more speeches. About 1,000 followed the rally with a 27-block march to the closed gates of the Governor's mansion. The Governor had announced in advance that he did not want his daughter, Chelsea, to lose the great respect she had been taught to have for teachers and was afraid that the event might impact unfavorably on her attitude.

During the week before the test, both the Governor and the legislature worked to insure confidentiality of the test scores. Act 76 had limited those who would receive the scores to the state Education Department, the local school district, and the teacher. One bill was proposed to exclude the school district and another proposed to provide no disclosure at all.

On March 21, 1985, two days before the test was to be administered, boxes of examination copies arrived and were transported to a warehouse, wired with alarms and lights, to be under watch 24 hours a day through shifts involving six off-duty officers hired by the state to guard the tests. To protect against security leaks, each crate's contents were to be examined, counted, and sealed.

The day before the test, Governor Clinton held a news conference to encourage all teachers to take the test and for all Arkansans to support them. In another news conference, Peggy Nabors, AEA president, predicted that 8,000 teachers would boycott the test and promised that the AEA would support them. The same day, the constitutionality of Act 76 was upheld by Chancellor Bruce T. Bullion.

The day of the test arrived March 23, 1985. A total of 25,077 of 29,700 state educators required to take the test did so, with an unknown number boycotting. Over 3,000 had excused absences, so less than 1,600 of the AEA-predicted 8,000 actually boycotted. However, some teachers signed in for the test with a "UP" following their names to signify "under protest" while others wore black armbands. In spite of the dissention, many teachers described the test as simple after having taken it. They also seemed to agree that sample materials were accurate in their portrayal of test questions.

The same day, KARK-TV announced on its 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. newscasts that it had obtained copies of the reading and mathematics sections of the basic skills test the night before the test. Teachers who had taken the test confirmed that they were actual copies of the test. General Education Division Director Venters denied that the copies were real, insisting that security was so tight that Department of Education personnel had not even seen the test.

A few days later the same station reported that it had obtained another copy of the test, this time, the reading and writing portions. The

woman who brought in the copy claimed that it had originally been purchased for $100 and then duplicated and distributed to teachers who were friends of the person who bought the test.

Amid a growing number of reports from teachers around the state that they had seen copies of the test prior to its administration March 23rd, Governor Clinton asked the State Police to investigate the allegations. Three full-time investigators began the probe March 24th.

While the investigation continued, Clinton appeared on ABC's "This Week With David Brinkley" with Mary Hatwood Futrell, NEA President, Albert Shanker, American Federation of Teachers President, and Education Secretary William J. Bennett, to defend teacher tests. The first of May, Clinton and AEA President Nabors engaged in spirited debate in Little Rock on a local taping of the "Donahue" show which was shown live in Arkansas, but rebroadcast two days later to an estimated 7 million viewers. Again, Clinton defended teacher testing, with vehement opposition from Nabors.

On June 26, 1985, about three months after the basic skills test was first administered, the results arrived. Governor Clinton announced that 90 percent of the 28,276 teachers and administrators who had taken the test, including makeup tests, had passed. The relatively good news was soon followed by the bad news that black teachers did worse on the test than did white teachers. Appearing July 7th on CBS's "Face the Nation", Clinton said that multiple opportunities to take the exam should erase the differences.

One of the first teachers not rehired because of not taking the test was Sandra Tedder, one of the ten teachers involved in the suit questioning the constitutionality of the exam. She boycotted the test and when her teaching certificate expired she was replaced by the district's board.

The first of August, the state Public Employee Claims Division rejected the claim of Juanita Mosley who said that her husband, William C. Mosley, Principal of McGehee Junior High School, died of a heart attack resulting from stress and anxiety brought on by taking the teacher test. She claimed that the death was job related.

In early September, the Education Department acknowledged that few teachers were taking advantage of its offers to help teachers who failed the basic skills test. A self-study guide was distributed to those who failed, a 15-part television series entitled "Skills Seminar" was offered by the Arkansas Educational Television Network, and classes were to be given in local school districts and universities to assist teachers to improve skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. So few teachers responded to the class offer that only one remedial class was offered, September 7th. A number of educators speculated that fear of being identified as having failed the test was keeping participation down.

About 8,000 of the teachers and administrators who took the test in March and May were mailed in mid-November corrections of errors made in printing the score sheets reporting their performance on the reading part of the test. Some papers labeled unsatisfactory were really satisfactory and vice-versa. Then, on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, it was announced

that 4,589 educators who took the test September 21 received each other's scores as a result of the wrong address labels being placed on the envelopes containing the scores. Included among that number was General Education Division Director Venters.

Another leak occurred before the January, 1986, administration of the test. Someone gave a copy of the mathematics part of the test to radio station KARN at about the same time they were being delivered to the State Police for safekeeping. An employee of the delivery firm that brought the papers from Iowa City, Iowa, later turned himself in in connection with the incident.

On May 29, 1986, the AEA filed suit challenging that the Arkansas Educational Skills Assessment discriminated against blacks, was not valid, did not relate to the work teachers did, and that its administration violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In response, Governor Clinton said that the test had withstood previous challenges, and that a committee of educators, one-third of whom were black, had evaluated the test as to job-relatedness and discrimination.

The test was offered two final times in May of 1987, the 2nd and 30th, which marked about a dozen offerings of the exam. Another problem arose in that some teachers who took the exam on the 2nd did not receive their scores in time to know whether they had passed. Finding out necessitated driving to a test center, all of which were in Pulaski County, in the Little Rock area. For at least one teacher that meant a two and a half hour drive each way.

Toward the end of July, 1987, the final results of the basic skills test were announced. A total of 37,326 persons, including repeats, took the test since March 23, 1985. Of these, 96.4 percent eventually passed, 91 percent on the first try. On the other hand, 1,354, or 3.6 percent were never able to pass the test. They will be unable to renew their state teaching certificates when they expire. For some, however, that expiration will not come until as late as 1997 because of 10-year certificates. In addition, teachers who failed the test would still be eligible to serve as substitute teachers for as long as 90 days a year.

Dr. Ruth Steele, then an associate superintendent in the Little Rock District, noted that other steps had been taken during the three and a half year period of the testing controversy so that the basic skills test would no longer be necessary. Teachers who failed the test, but wish to continue teaching must now apply for a new certificate and meet initial certification requirements. That means that they must take any new college classes required in their teaching fields. They must also take more tests: the National Teachers Exam (NTE) Pre-professional Skills Test, the NTE Professional Knowledge Test and the NTE specialty area exams.

What lessons are to be learned from this experience relative to the teacher evaluation process? On the positive side, there is the possibility that teachers as a whole will now provide better role models for students. Having basic skills certainly does not provide sufficient skills for good teaching, but are they not at least necessary?

On the other hand, how much does a basic skills test tell anyone about a teacher's competence in the classroom? What do reading, writing, and arithmetic skills convey about caring for children, about questioning skills, about being aware of misunderstandings and helping to resolve them, about discipline, about lunchroom and bus duty, about planing a piece of wood, about dealing with pregnant teenagers, about coping with emotional stress, about encouraging dropouts to stay in school?

In what light does the public now see the teacher? Teacher incompetence was supposedly the rationale for the test. Lobbying against the test gave teachers the appearance of supporting this incompetence. News headlines focused on lawsuits, rallies, marches, boycotts, a host of aids to help the teachers pass a test most were later to call simple, and on teachers who, after numerous testings, study guides, televised skill-development programs, and university courses, still could not score 70 percent on a test of basic skills.

Mistakes were made. Trying to railroad educational improvements without the cooperation of those most directly involved in implementing them was clearly a doomed effort. The test was not a valid measure of teaching skills. Although it was never officially claimed to be that kind of measure, it came to be largely regarded as just that. Rushed decision making and implementation of testing and scoring contributed unnecessary problems. Beyond all of these problems, however, is the underlying problem of how did the situation get to the point of needing remedial measures? Where were the educators who were vociferous in their complaints, but apparently had lost their voices along the path leading to

teacher testing? The fact of the matter is that educators lacked the leaders who could have recognized the problems and done something about them. Who allowed illiterates into teacher education programs in the first place? Even more of a concern, who allowed them to pass courses and subsequently, to graduate? What about the content of the courses? Do they reflect the needs of teachers as well as students?

The pertinent question really is not one of looking into the past, but the future. Has the education profession seen fit to be professional and confront its problems? Has it dealt with curricular needs? Are its graduates prepared to cope with the problems they will encounter? Are they prepared to help students cope with their problems? Is the profession taking steps to ensure that those who enter its ranks are indeed competent to lead hundreds, even thousands, of young scholars? Most teacher tests currently being implemented require only an indication of literacy and minimal writing and arithmetic skills. If teachers are to be respected and be leaders, these tests will be of no help. Teachers must demand from themselves that which they claim others are not measuring. Public support for teacher testing merely confirms the obvious: Teachers have not done their homework. Now is the time to engage that effort or the next test may be one for which they are not prepared.

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